

Spice of life

Indian cooking expert Sadia Bukhari claims, "There's no mystical secret behind Indian cuisine. It's the simplest of all international cuisines. Once you master the spices it's easy."

By By: Diane Dash

Published: Tuesday, October 4, 2005 12:00 AM PDT

Like Pavlov's dogs, the scents alone make you salivate. Fresh grated coconut, ginger, cardamom, and cinnamon, saffron and sweetened fennel seeds combine with dals and rices mix and mingle to form a whole greater than its exotic parts. Indian cooking expert Sadia Bukhari claims, "There's no mystical secret behind Indian cuisine. It's the simplest of all international cuisines. Once you master the spices it's easy."

Like many things, easy may be a relative term. With 30 years experience and a degree in food and nutrition, Bukhari admits cooking is an art. As owner and founder of the School of Authentic Indian Cooking her goal is to teach others the techniques and knowledge needed to create delicious and healthy East Indian food.

"I want to reach the American community to share the secrets of authentic Indian cooking," she said. "It's not just about flavor and aroma, it's also about the medicinal properties and creating a complete meal." Her approach is to use less oils and fats in combination with these high fiber, high protein and low carb foods. Certain ingredients' purpose, such as asafetida, is to make the food more digestible, rather than to create additional flavor. Some spices, such as turmeric, can even help with joint or back pain.

Bukhari peppers her demonstrations with personal anecdotes about Indian culture and history, seeming especially grateful to the Mogul Kings for bringing saffron to the country. "Indian food is not only a reflection of the people of India, but all of South Asia. It represents the region's historical development, religious beliefs, cultural practices, and above all, its geographic attributes," says the expert chef.

Although there are many regional cuisines, Bukhari focuses on traditional North and South Indian dishes.

Chutneys - which can be used as side dishes, spreads or snacks - are essential to all East Indian meals. Coconut chutney is especially popular in southern dishes. Bukhari demonstrated how to best break open a fresh coconut. First, poke holes into the "eyes" and drain out the coconut milk (which is also delicious). Next, heat the coconut in a microwave for one to two minutes to soften. Then, place the coconut on a hard surface and tap around the center line with a hammer until the shell breaks.

Bukhari claims South Indians "cannot live without curry leaves and mustard seed" which along with chana, urad and toovar dals* are the backbone of the region's foodstuff. South Indian food generally requires less preparation and fewer spices and is often steamed or boiled. It's also frequently meatless as the predominant religions in that area teach vegetarianism.

The dishes generally found in Indian restaurants such as biryani, korma, and tandoori represent Northern cuisine which often involves more elaborate preparation. It uses more saffron and meats, and includes naan (Indian flat bread) and paneer (home made cheese).

The class I attended involved preparation of masala dosas (a potato filled rice-lentil crepe), sambar (vegetable and lentil stew), boiled basmati rice, coconut chutney, rava sheera (farina and raisin pudding) and paan, a 5,000-year-old delicacy that consists of a beetle leaf filled with coconut, lime paste, beetle nuts, cardamom and sweetened fennel seeds.

Various techniques were displayed such as "tempering" which involves frying with additional spices and ingredients to finish the dish. The proper way to cook basmati rice was also demonstrated. A light, slatted spoon should be used to avoid bruising these delicate grains. Bukhari recommends buying this rice in bulk and aging it to produce a richer flavor and aroma. Adding salt to the bag will keep insects away.

Sri Purohith, a Microsoft test lead originally from South India and a student in the class was very excited to begin the instruction. Raising two boys while his wife does her residency in Ohio has

been challenging. Although he can cook a bit he wanted more in-depth instruction. " I want to know how each spice works together, the chemistry of it," said Purohith. He feels the classes are helping him "learn to survive."

Bukhari says cooking is the love of her life. Her dishes put all necessary nutrients into a single menu and can usually be prepared ahead of time. She is currently creating vegetarian versions of all of her non-vegetarian meals.

Classes are held from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. at the Lake City Community Center, 12531 28th Ave. NE in Seattle. To sign up for the following demonstrations please contact Sadia at (206) 330-2065 or at saic_seattle@yahoo.com. Ample food is provided, so come hungry.

*dal - all members of the dried peas and bean family and the dishes made from them.

Upcoming classes

October 19: Appetizer Platter - Includes vegetable samosas, fresh cilantro chutney and masalah tea.

November 7: From the Fields of Punjab - Includes Daal Chana and Kheer, a rice pudding with cardamom and pistachios.

November 21: Thanksgiving Feast - Includes turkey marinated in fragrant spices and herbs, and saffron rice.

Coconut Chutney

1 cup unsweetened coconut
1/4 cup yellow split chick peas (channa dal)

1 whole red pepper, chopped
1/2 inch fresh ginger root, peeled and chopped
A pinch of asafetida*
2-3 grape size balls tamarind,* soaked, squeezed and strained
2-3 tablespoons fresh, chopped cilantro leaves
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon honey or brown sugar
1/2 cup water
** These items can be found in grocery stores carrying Indian or Asian foods.*

Tempering:

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1/2 teaspoon mustard seeds

4-5 curry leaves

1. Dry roast channa dal in a frying pan on medium-low heat. Stirring and shaking the pan until light golden brown. Transfer to a bowl, let cool and grind in a coffee grinder until a fine powder.

2. Combine grated coconut, channa dal powder, chopped ginger, tamarind paste, cilantro, red pepper, salt, honey or brown sugar and asafetida, adding water as needed. Blend in a food processor until it forms a thick paste, then transfer to a serving bowl.

3. Heat oil in a small frying pan on medium-low heat. Add mustard seeds and curry leaves at once to sizzle for a few seconds (partially cover pan as mustard seeds splatter). Add to chutney and cover, letting mixture rest for 5 minutes before serving at room temperature.